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ABSTRACT

This paper contains a brief description of the origin and history of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC). The paper includes a description of the events during the 1940s that led to the formation of a conference on freshman English which would be sponsored by the National Council of Teachers of English and would be held in the early spring. Following descriptions of the Council's Executive Committee meeting which authorized the conference and of the first CCCC convention in 1950, the bulk of the paper examines the course followed by the CCCC during the 1950s. The examination of the 1950s also points out some of the deficiences during those beginning years, especially the failure to develop a philosophical framework, but concludes by stressing the strength and vitality of the organization. (RB)

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John C. Gerber

Loomings

My title, of course, comes from the first chapter of Moby-Dick. Ishmael describes his problem thus: "Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet; and especially whenever my hypos get such an upper hand of me, that it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people's hats off--then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can. This is my substitute for pistol and ball."

The quotation has point for those of us who were teaching freshman courses in composition and communication skills in the late 1940's. We were indeed grim about the mouth, and if we weren't bringing up the rear of every funeral, we weren't leading any parades either. We taught the course, we confidently believed, that was the most necessary, the most helpful, and often the most innovative of any in our respective departments. We dealt with students--all students. We helped them with a universal difficulty--learning to express themselves. We believed that we had devised new methods of instruction, better ways of evaluation, and more reliable ways of reading student papers. We worked harder and longer, we were sure, than our colleagues. Nevertheless despite all this and more, we remained second class citizens. Department chairmen thinly praised us each fall and then forgot about us for the rest of the year. Eighteenth-century scholars looked down their noses at us and medievalists barely tolerated us. So we decided to go to sea--that is, to organize. This was our substitute for pistol and ball. And on the whole the voyage has been a much happier one than Ishmael's. At least the white whale hasn't carried us under yet.

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Our beginnings, of course, weren't all this dramatic. As I confessed in an anniversary meeting here in St. Louis ten years ago, the Four C's got started almost by a fluke--though in retrospect it seems clear that there was an inevitability about its creation. If the organization hadn't started when it did with the people it did, it would have started not long afterward with others directing its course. The need was too great to be long ignored.

The fact is that the Four C's started in the most unpromising way one can imagine. In February of 1947 the National Council and the Speech Association, both interested in the new communication skills courses designed primarily for returning veterans, sponsored a conference in Chicago on the teaching of reading, writing, and speaking at the college level. Despite the gentleness and tact of the late Porter Perrin, who was in charge, it soon became clear that <u>that</u> was not the point in history when the National Council and the Speech Association were going to cooperate on anything, unless it was their mutual destruction. Yet the 1947 conference was not a failure by any means. Its possibilities rather than its realizations remained alive in the minds of many who participated in it.

The next and controlling event was a meeting at the NCTE convention in Chicago in the fall of 1948, a meeting on the topic of "Three Views of Required English." It was late Friday afternoon in one of the tower rooms of the old Stevens Hotel, and as chairman I had been warned that the meeting had to be adjourned promptly so that everyone had time to dress for the annual banquet. (Yes, everyone <u>did</u> dress for banquets in those days.) The views on required English turned out to be many and provocative, and the discussion became not only animated but contentious. The meeting went fifteen minutes over time,

then thirty minutes, then forty-five minutes. Finally, in desperation I commandeered the microphone and said that we had to stop, adding as a kind of joke that we should get together in the spring and talk about nothing else but freshman English for three days. Almost every head nodded and there was a spattering of applause. To get off the hook more than anything else I asked how many would actually return to Chicago in the spring if we scheduled a convention on the freshman course. Every hand went up. From that point on, the Four C's, or something like it, was a certainty.

Late the next day, two or three of us met with the Executive Committee of the Council and asked permission to hold a spring conference on freshman English under Council auspices. Two things about this meeting cling in my memory. One is that Wilbur Hatfield, whom we had expected to oppose the request, because of his continuing fear that the Council would fragment, turned out to be our strongest supporter. We had great help, too, from Marion Sheridan, who was then President of the Council. The other thing that I remember was that everyone at the meeting was eating chocolates. Those were the simple days, you see, when a Whitman sampler could bring the sense of peace and joy that present executive committees must seek from Johnnie Walker. Whatever the circumstances, we did win the approval of the NCTE executive committee, and much more easily than we had expected to.

Sponsored, then, by the National Council, a Conference on College Courses in Composition and Communication was held in Chicago April 1-2, 1949. Almost exactly 500 attended. On the organizing committee were such persons as George Wycoff, Harold Allen, John Cowley, Sam Weingarten, Karl Dykema, and Carlton Wells. Ernest Samuels of Northwestern was chairman of the Local

Committee, and he was aided by such stalwarts as Wallace Douglas, Harrison Hayford, Robert Mayo, and Henry Sams. Speakers included James McCrimmon, Wallace Douglas, Harold Allen, S.I. Hayakawa, Paul Liederich, Robert Pooley, John Ashton, Carrie Stanley, and Carlton Wells. The topics for discussion may sound more than vaguely familiar to you:

Concepts Basic to Courses in Composition and Communication
Four Theories of Course Organization
The Needs and Possibilities of Research
Integrating High School and College Work
Instructional Methods
Obtaining, Training, and Keeping a Competent Staff

At the business meeting, those attending the conference unanimously requested that a more permanent organization be formed under the aegis of the National Council. Such a request was forwarded to the Council's executive committee that now was really disturbed. At its meeting the following November in Buffalo the executive committee, with memories of the splits with speech teachers and journalism teachers still reasonably fresh, authorized the creation of the Conference on College Composition and Communication but only on a tentative basis, that is for a trial period of three years. It was authorized to elect its own officers, except the treasurer; he had to be the treasurer of the National Council on the theory that the child won't stray very far away if mother keeps the money. The new organization was also authorized to hold a spring meeting each year and to publish its own journal.

We can't really romanticize ourselves as poor, struggling urchin lost in an alien world. If we didn't spring full grown from the brow of Jove, we sprang as a fairly lusty babe from the brow of the Council. Over 500 attended the first meeting in Chicago in 1950, and the membership by the end of that year was 550, representing 46 states as well as Hawaii and the District

of Columbia. The first issue of the Bulletin, with Charles Roberts as editor, appeared in March 1950.

In 1952, the Council's Executive Committee gave us a second lease on life, again for three years. They could hardly do otherwise since we had made bold to draw up our own Constitution and By-Laws and submit it by mail to our membership for approval. Of the 500 and some ballots sent out, a total of 179 were returned; 2 left the ballots unmarked, 175 voted approval and 2 malcontents voted disapproval. Then in 1955, the Executive Committee of the Council voted the 4 C's permanent tenure. The vote was unanimous, and many of the executive committee voiced their pleasure that the 4 C's had not wrecked the Council or even the College Section. Someone even noted with satisfaction that we had regularly paid our Council dues as well as our 4 C's dues.

But to get back to the beginning. I am trying hard to resist the temptation to flood you with anecdotes about the first year--and not succeeding. Three especially press for repetition.

There was, for one, the character at the first pre-session business meeting in the spring of 1950, who helpfully made motion after motion, called for the question when discussion became extended, and led the chorus of ayes when the question was put. He was clearly the most valuable person there. Only later did we discover that he was not a member at all but a book salesman fresh from two hours at the bar.

There was the occasion, too, when one of our most sedate members chased a waitress at Henrici's back into the kitchen because he thought she had overcharged him--and was promptly ushered out of it by a whole squadron of cooks

who mistook his innocent motive. The cheers of his 4 C's colleagues didn't die down until he fled from the restaurant. And there was that never-to-be-forgotten experience of going up in a crowded elevator with a handsome male and a stunning blonde, she turning to him with true love in her eyes as the elevator stopped at their floor, and cooing in a voice we all could hear, "What did you say your name was?"

So much for the creation of the organization. In the remainder of this paper, let me report on our organization's first decade and add a few personal observations.

Really to review the activities and concerns of the 4 C's in the fifties, we need to go back to the programs of the annual meetings to see what occupied the members. What strikes one immediately is that there was continuing rivalry, sometimes tinged slightly by acrimony, as I recall, between those who taught composition courses and those who taught communication courses. The composition forces seem to have outnumbered the communication forces by at least three to one, but the latter group made up in vigor and commitment what they lacked in numbers. (Indeed they had from the outset been so vigorous that the word "communication" got into the organization's title despite the awkwardness of a title with four C's in it.) Throughout the entire decade there were workshops and panels on the functions of the composition course and those of the communication course, on the organization and purposes of the composition course and those of the communication course, on the training of teachers for the composition course and the training of teachers for the communication course. Once in a while there was a panel discussion on "What's new in communication?" though I find nothing comparable about composition.

Presumably there was nothing new in composition. One communication workshop in 1956 committed itself to the doctrine that "communication" should imply training not only in reading, writing, speaking, and listening but also in observing and demonstrating. Apparently this was too much for the rest of the communication folk, however, since the subject seems not to have been brought up again. But if the composition and communication adherents wrangled and argued over their respective courses, they totally agreed on one issue: the common enemy was the senior professor of literature. More than once, as I vividly recall, senior literature professors were referred to as the troglodytes of departments of English. More bitterly they were called the power structure. It was they, it was generally felt, who kept freshman staffs in peonage and at the lowest possible salary levels. Maybe it was this belief in a common enemy that pulled us together so quickly. There was great solace in sharing stories about our own hard lot and in deploring the lack of native intelligence in those in the professorial ranks above us. Whatever the reasons and despite the composition-communication vendetta, the friendships we developed in those early years were strong and, I am glad to say, lasting.

There were other topics that occupied us throughout the fifties too: improving writing ability, for example, and improving reading ability. Testing and theme grading, those hoary old perennials, occupied us for the full ten years, and so did the problems of articulating high school and college work. Of special interest to this group, possibly, was what happened in the field of language. It is no exaggeration to say that the ten convention programs of the fifties reflect the birth of linguistics as we now know it. In 1950 Darrel Abel led a workshop on "Grammar in the Freshman Course" and in 1951 a similar workshop was scheduled, but in neither year does the word linguistics

appear in the convention program though Donald Lloyd in the Bulletin for February 1951 used it as a lance in attacking the doctrine of correctness. At the 1952 convention there was a workshop on "The Place of Linguistics in the Communication Course," and in 1953 some of the big guns were wheeled in for a panel discussion of "The Structural Analysis of English and Its Implications for Teaching." The panelists were Robert Pooley, Charles Fries, Russel Cosper, Albert Markwardt, and George Faust. The next year, 1954, Harold Allen addressed the first general session on the subject "Linguistics," and, as I seem to remember, came out in favor of it. By this time interest in the subject was snowballing. In 1954, also, there were three panel discussions on "Modern Linguistics and the Teaching of Freshman English" with speakers such as J.E. Congleton, Nelson Francis, Charles Fries, Sumner Ives, Donald Lloyd, James McMillan, and L.M. Myers. A few more examples. In 1955 a group of panelists led by James Sledd addressed themselves to the question, "Shall we teach grammar?" In 1956 there was a workshop on "Problems in Teaching Structure of Language," and a panel on "Applying Structural Linguistics to Specific Teaching Problems." Two years later the Conference began offering one workshop for old hands in linguistics and another for the neophytes. In 1959, for the first time so far as I can discover, a workshop turned to Noam Chomsky and generative grammar. Note two things in this brief summary: one, that linguistics throughout most of the 1950's meant structural linguistics, and two that both speakers and listeners in those simple-minded days were reasonably confident that linguistics would ultimately be a magic wand that would enable students to write with gusto and grace.

Although not on every program, topics frequently discussed were programs

for superior students, for poor students, and for foreign students, uses of the mass media, courses in creative writing, training students for business and industry, and the professional status of the freshman English teacher. Especially toward the end of the decade there was great interest in entrance tests and advanced placement tests, and even in national standards and accreditation of programs in composition and communication. In 1955 Warner Rice led a discussion dear to his heart: "Reorganizing the Ph.D. Program for Preparing College Teachers of English." Alas, Warner was not only ahead of the fifties but of the present decade too. Topics that were short-lived were the Rudolf Flesh's writing formula (1950), general semantics (1950, 51, 52), group dynamics (1950, 1957), and the Critical Incident Technique, whatever that was (1951). In 1958 came the first sure sign of happy times ahead: A workshop on the topic "Maintaining Standards in Spite of Rising Enrollments." There was a great fear expressed that freshman staffs might have to be filled by available housewives and retired ministers.

Lest you think that I am sinking slowly into a mire of nostalgia for the dear dead days of long ago, let me assure you that I have no such intention. In reviewing the history of our work in the fifties I am as much struck by our limitations as by our successes. There were eventualities that we probably could not have anticipated and therefore could not be blamed for neglecting. I'm not sure, for example, that we could have anticipated the huge growth of the community college in the sixties, and certainly not the Vietnam war, the drug culture, the campus revolts and general unrest that led to such changes as open classrooms, grading by contract, and unions of graduate assistants. As a matter of fact, even the faculties of the sixties weren't prepared for what happened in their own decade.

But I can fault the 4 C's of the fifties for the fragmentation of its thought. By this I mean our failure to place our activities in broad contexts, intellectual, social, or even educational. We regularly and usefully, I think, shared our thinking about such subjects as course organizations, classroom techniques, and standards of excellence in the skills of communication, but we rarely if ever tried to assess these activities within the larger ranges of human thought and activity that would have given them broad significance and ourselves a greater sense of contribution to human welfare. For example, the concept of communication elicited little more from us than notions about a different kind of course, one in which the student would be trained in oral as well as written skills. There was little attempt to explore the broad psychological and social natures of human communication, and to build our courses on such foundations. Abortive discussions on general semantics made gestures toward profounder understandings, but never got much further than recognizing the fact that the map is not the territory, that the word is not the thing, facts that seem reasonably self-evident. I can recall or find nothing about the psycho-physiological nature of the communicative act, about the physical and emotional and social elements that impair that act or even block it; about the possible consequences, again psychological and social, of the act. There was no concern that I can recall about the nature of the medium and its relation to the communicative process. Instead the theme or speech was viewed largely as product instead of process.

We talked about helping the student to achieve excellence in unity, organization, and clarity of language as though these are Platonic essences which, once achieved, are equally effective in all times and with all persons.

We seldom, in other words, intensively examined our own subject, i.e., the intricate process called communication. And to the best of my knowledge the need for research in the field was rarely mentioned.

Mentioning communication as process reminds me, in the second place, that we rarely talked about teaching as process. Had we done so we would have been more concerned about the nature of those at the receiving end, namely the students. I find almost nothing in the programs or in the Bulletin about the particular nature of the students in the fifties, and the need for adapting our teaching to such persons. What is surprising about this is that the students of the fifties, especially of the early fifties, were a very special breed. Remember the period: Harry Truman was president until 1953, and Dwight Eisenhower until 1961. It was the period of the Korean War, and of Senator Joseph McCarthy and his hunt for commies and perverts. In some ways it was as sick a period as we have ever gone through. Even liberal Americans had lost their sense of humor and were downright frightened, many of them, that they would be singled out by McCarthy and his henchmen. No wonder that Time Magazine in 1951 called college students grave, conventional, apathetic, and fatalistic. A Purdue poll showed that the majority of them had little confidence in the freedoms assured by the Bill of Rights. In 1953 Thornton Wilder used the term that has been applied to them ever since: they were, he wrote in the Yale Daily News, the "silent generation." They were guarded, he said, and leary of authority though they were not going to stick out their necks. Certainly they were dubious about the world which they had inherited.

These, in short, were a special kind of student--just as students at any time and place are a special kind of student. We should have been exploring

ways of cutting through their masks in order to evoke unfelt thoughts and feelings. But again I remember no paper about the context of the times and the consequences and challenges of it for our profession. Nor do I see any title in the programs or any paper in the Bulletin that suggests this.

Nor do I recall or find much about the nature of higher education in a democracy and the peculiar importance of the freshman course to the success of what was, and is, an educational enterprise that has not wholly proved itself. There were a few papers on the freshman course in the liberal arts college and in the university or technical school but these largely reported on administrative and curricular problems, not on the place of the freshman course with respect to the purposes and philosophy of higher education as a whole. The point I'm trying to make was probably best stated by Emerson in his essay on the "American Scholar" when he wrote of man as being metamorphosed into a thing, into too many things. "The planter," he wrote as you will recall, "who is man sent out into the field to gather food, is seldom cheered by any idea of the true dignity of his ministry. He sees his bushel and his cart, and nothing beyond, and sinks into the farmer, instead of Man on the farm. The tradesman scarcely ever gives an ideal worth to his work, but is ridden by the routine of his craft, and the soul is subject to dollars. The priest becomes a form; the attorney a statute-book; the mechanic a machine; the sailor a rope of the ship. In this distribution of functions the scholar is the delegated intellect. In the right state he is Man Thinking. In the degenerate state, when the victim of society, he tends to become a mere thinker, or still worse, the parrot of other men's thinking." If we had any basic weakness in the 1950's it was that we were sentences and paragraphs and not men and women thinking.

But I would not flagellate too severely what we were twenty-five years ago. Twenty-twenty hindsight is not uncommon. And probably twenty-five years from now some one will stand here--possibly in this very room--and list the deficiencies of the 4 C's in the nineteen seventies. As a result of the work of many people, the 4 C's did get started, and the strength and vitality of the organization today, I should like to think, indicates that what was done in the nineteen-fifties could not have been all amiss.

John C. Gerber
March, 1975